

THIS IS STILL TOM LEHRER'S WEEK THAT WAS

AUGUST 2, 2025 | JOEL SCHLOSBERG | 0 COMMENTS



George Murphy, "a senator who can really sing and dance," shown doing just that with Lana Turner and Joan Blondell. Lehrer predicted that Ronald Reagan would follow the previous Screen Actors Guild president's efforts to "mix show business with politics" but not the dominance of the champion of *WrestleMania 23's Battle of the Billionaires*. Public domain.

Six decades after Tom Lehrer adapted his songs on such then-current topics as the Second Vatican Council and the vice-presidency of Hubert Horatio Humphrey from NBC's *That Was the Week That Was* into his final album *That Was the Year That Was*, it remains clear that his works will remain relevant weeks, and years, after his passing on July 26 at 97.

Even at 37, Lehrer agonized that "when Mozart was my age, he had been dead for two years." The more contemporary composer Gustav Mahler had been decomposing for 53 when his widow Alma was memorialized by Lehrer. An ongoing outpouring of letters to the editor testifies to the outstanding memorableness of Lehrer's musical output, such as Stephen DeBock's in the August 1 *Wall Street Journal* [recalling](#) how his "devout Christian mother, upon hearing 'The Vatican Rag,' begged me to play it again and again as tears of laughter streamed down her cheeks" — while the popular music of today makes even such then-edgier albums sharing the mid-Sixties Billboard charts with Lehrer as *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* seem as reverential as Mahler's Resurrection Symphony.

Admittedly, as *LA Times* columnist Michael Hiltzik [noted](#) on Lehrer's 90th birthday, writing about "racial conflict, pollution, religious intolerance, nuclear brinkmanship" ensured engaging issues that "have never gone away." If anything, Lehrer underestimated the political rancor to come. The current wave of anti-obscenity legislation won't be opposed as openly by either what Lehrer called "the civil liberties types who are fighting this issue ... as a matter of freedom of speech and stifling of free expression" or by those like himself for whom "dirty books are fun!" He quipped of the era's Cold War enemies that "Russia got the bomb, but that's OK, 'cause the balance of power's maintained that way" and "China got the bomb, but have no fears; they can't wipe us out for at least five years."

In the 2003 book *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, Lehrer is quoted as a self-described "wishy-washy liberal" who sees little mettle in playing one of his most-requested ditties since "everyone is against pollution." Yet the ozone layer was saved from chlorofluorocarbon corrosion in large part via staunch conservative Margaret Thatcher — and thus, as Carl Sagan pointed out, the British leader's "early studies in chemistry" — while the Ronald Reagan Lehrer jibed years before winning elections initiated nuclear arms reductions influenced by the dramatized telefilm *The Day After*.

Lehrer foresaw a future where competition between nations produced nuclear weaponry "transistorized at half the price." Further exponential dwindling of costs, mostly in areas distant enough from politics for real market competition, has produced a world closer to the surreal exaggerations of Gary Larson's *The Far Side*, in which "the Hendersons have the bomb" on the lawn next door. Properly harnessed for social cooperation, free choices can join neighborhoods and nations in harmony, without the chorus being Lehrer's "We Will All Go Together When We Go."

New Yorker Joel Schlosberg is a senior news analyst at The William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism.

PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY

1. ["This is Still Tom Lehrer's Week That Was"](#) by Joel Schlosberg, CounterPunch, August 4, 2025